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## STUDENTS' INTERACTIONAL AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN ACADEMIC SEMINARS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores the range of discourse manifestations and styles that can be encountered in academic seminars in England and Italy with a view to pointing out significant differences in the institutional practices of these two communities. The specific focus is the patterns of students' interactional strategies mainly in relation to the tutors' discourse and the textual, ideational and interpersonal (Halliday, 1985) model that it provides. As the term suggests, strategies are consciously calculated "reconstructable intentions" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 7-8) and not arbitrary moves, although they are "only partly the result of conscious calculation" (Goody, 1978: 8) as, for one thing, the rapidity of conversational exchanges does not allow for lengthy considerations. As a result, interactional strategies are better interpreted as goal-oriented behaviours, which are "constrained by important contextual features, such as the relative power of the speakers, the social distance of the speakers and what the speakers happen to be negotiating at the time" (Simpson, 1995: 171). The students observed use a number of strategies that indicate a concern for their interlocutors' wants and a desire to ensure harmony, as well as the attempt to achieve their own discourse objectives (Goody, 1978: 5). Therefore, this paper analyzes politeness strategies as the cooperative behaviour that aims to minimize threats to an interlocutor's public face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and within it, the use of questions asked by the students when discussing texts and topics within seminars. By highlighting the students' politeness strategies and more specifically their questioning practices in the two academic contexts, this study points to the different ways in which within each academic community a subject's identity is construed in consideration of the different role relationships between the participants. Students continuously change and adjust their role as novice members of the academic community and negotiate their space in the interaction, but in the two contexts they display different degrees of assumed responsibility and autonomy in constructing critical discourse.

Theoretically, the present research is founded on the joint contributions of pragmatics and conversation analysis. It also touches on issues of power and dominance in discourse practices in that the interaction between tutors and students in academic seminars is asymmetrical. However, without putting excessive premium on the power dimension and following Schegloff's (1997) and Heritage's suggestion (2005), this study considers the speakers' identity and their role within the interactional process as continuously negotiated and locally developed through interaction rather than permanently and rigidly structured by the asymmetry inherent in the tutor-student relationship.

Ideally, seminars are pedagogical situations in which a tutor takes the role of guide, mentor and expert while the student forms a type of apprentice relationship with him/her, and the general sense of the learning experience is that the student "proceeds by self-discovery, rather than passively internalising instruction" (Benwell, 1999: 536). An established practice in England and recently also in Italy, seminars offer an ideal site to compare the two academic contexts.

The choice of questions as one of the foci of the present study derives from the recognition of their important role within the academic context. Questions are generally asked by the socially stronger speaker to elicit information and encourage critical reflection on the part of the students, although they may also be face-threatening acts (FTAs) in that they can put the respondent in a difficult situation in front of the group (Brown & Levinson, 1978 and Wu, 1993<sup>1</sup>). The two contexts observed are characterised by different discourse types: while the English students prefer questions, Italians more often resort to politeness. Such diversity points to the different tutor-student relationships and the different interpretations of seminars as a learning experience in England and Italy.

This study is based on a series of audio-taped undergraduate tutor-led seminars of about 90 minutes each, collected at two medium size universities, in southern England and in central Italy. In the belief that "there is probably a relationship between the epistemological properties of a discipline and the way knowledge is generated within subject tutorials" (Benwell, 1999: 561), when collecting the present corpus an attempt was made to ensure a degree of consistency by selecting seminars in the same or comparable disciplines in the two academic contexts. The corpus consists of six seminars in Linguistics, Anthropology, Literature and Drama, Philosophy, and History for each country<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY: RESEARCH ON POLITENESS AND QUESTIONS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Many of the studies on academic seminars analyse the discursive practices of that context with a view to enhancing the learning process (e.g. Baumgart,

1976; Dee, 1976; Bashiruddin *et al.* 1990; Reynolds, 1990; Graesser & Person, 1994; Rudolph, 1994; De Klerk, 1995; Benwell, 1996, 1999; and Benwell & Stokoe, 2002). For example, among the earliest studies, Dee (1976) advocates the reduction of tutor's talking space to encourage students to take the initiative beyond the traditional *responding* and *reacting* moves produced in response to what Baumgart (1976) defines the tutors' *soliciting* and *structuring* moves. De Klerk (1995), on the contrary, warns that seminars can be the forum for strong competition for the right to talk and that those minority groups, socialised into discourse modes other than the established Western practice, are likely to be disadvantaged and excluded.

The research literature on Italian academic interaction follows from studies on classroom interaction notably by Lumbelli (1974) and Orletti (1981a and 1981b) and, in the first comprehensive volume on this topic, Ciliberti and Anderson (1999) present various aspects of academic oral communication.

Together with questions, a consideration of the students' politeness strategies offers a significant cue to understand the projection of self within academic encounters. Politeness is indispensable in analysing such asymmetrical power-laden institutional exchanges as the tutor-student (Harris, 2003: 29). Attention to politeness strategies also ensures that the necessary consideration is given to the interactional component of seminars in which the ideational function that regulates the expression of ideas tends to prevail over the interpersonal or social function (Benwell, 1999: 538). According to the much cited Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), speakers attempt to preserve their own and their interlocutors' public self-image or 'face' – a notion that can be associated with identity<sup>3</sup> – as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). In their aspiration to ensure social harmony, speakers resort to a number of interpersonal strategies, among which questioning practices acquire a prominent role due to the asymmetrical context of university seminars.

In terms of definition, a question is the first part of an adjacency pair, or a speech-act, which requires a second part or subsequent speech. While for Searle (1969: 66) a question is an information-seeking act, for Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 28) it is "an act the function of which is to request a linguistic response – linguistic, although the response may be a non-verbal surrogate such as a nod or raised hand". In real life, questions fulfil a variety of discourse functions other than simply eliciting information and can be used to (dis)confirm, (dis)agree or invite clarification and repetition.

When defining questions, the central issue is the mapping of form on to function. According to Graesser and Person (1994), for instance, questions cannot be defined according to syntactic and semantic criteria alone. Similarly,

Weber (1993: 8) argues that no specific element can be seen as unambiguously defining a question, not even intonation, as no canonical questioning intonation exists, although some tones are more frequently associated with questions than others.

Questions are often associated with power-laden situations<sup>4</sup> and in institutional discourse, they are asked by interlocutors who are higher in authority and status. Consequently students' questions may, in some instances, be a dispreferred behaviour if perceived as challenging, especially in an educational context (Håkansson & Lindberg, 1988). Also, questions are usually asked by high achieving students while low achievers tend to ask fewer ones and may end up becoming intellectually passive (Good, 1981 and Good *et al.*, 1987).

### 3. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: QUESTIONING AND POLITENESS MODELS

The present analysis of questions is based on a functional-pragmatic model that encompasses formal questions and isolated items uttered with a rising intonation or pitch (e.g. *Algoritmo narrativo? /Narrative algorithm?*). It also includes indirect 'alternatives to questioning' (Dillon, 1990), as in the case of declaratives soliciting clarification (e.g. *Non so se ho capito/I'm not sure I have understood*).

After Kearsley (1976), a functional definition of the questions encountered in this academic context is the following (in the examples, an arrow and/or italics mark the relevant element):

'epistemic' questions concern the acquisition of information and include 'referential' questions, aiming at a particular piece of information, as well as 'speculative' questions, conveying or eliciting a speaker's views.

For example, in the following exchange the student's speculative question tries to make sense of Locke's standpoint by hypothesising how this philosopher would perceive a specific situation.

(1) [EPH2]

→ FSt *So would he say, if he was in a room* and he hadn't noticed someone was there that the only reason he hadn't noticed was that he hadn't been aware of the idea of his perception of them, not that he hadn't just, hadn't seen him?<sup>5</sup>

'expressive' questions convey an expressive and attitudinal content together with the information content, and can include 'conductive' questions (Bublitz,

1981), which indicate the preference for a particular answer. An example of a conducive question that attempts to establish common ground between speakers is given below.

(2) [EHS1]

→FSt *Um a lot of ah like midwives and people like wet nurses they were accused of witchcraft, weren't they?* Because it was sort of a way of blaming the death of a child on midwives, so that therefore they were scape-goats to blame for death

'contingent' questions refer to a previous utterance and ask for its clarification or repetition, as in (3).

(3) [EHS1]

T We have a lecture on witchcraft next week in fact don't we? Because um inevitably the lectures get out of step with the classes um sometimes  
→FSt *So there is lecture in the reading week?*

In the process of students' identity construction, questioning practices play a central role in suggesting how participants to a seminar project themselves in response to the way they are viewed by their higher status interlocutors (the tutors) and their peers.

Politeness strategies present in the students' discourse also contribute to understand the students' projection of self and the way they deal with face-threatening acts (FTAs) that express the "mutual vulnerability of face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 68) in being a threat to their own and others' public image. FTAs can pose a risk to an addressee's (or H) negative-face wants, "by indicating (potentially) that the speaker (S) does not intend to avoid impeding H's freedom of action" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65), as for such speech acts as orders, suggestions or compliments. Alternatively, FTAs can threaten positive face if the speaker shows (potentially) no care for H's feelings and wants, through disapproval or criticism. Questions can often function as FTAs as they challenge H's ability to respond and conducive questions in particular can be perceived as a threat in that by seeking H's agreement with S's views, they are an imposition on H's evaluative space. As will be discussed below, the data from the academic seminars show that students can respond to FTAs and safeguard face while guaranteeing their own space in the interaction.

Speakers variously realise such strategies in language every day; "[i]nteraction is therefore a constant balancing act between protecting our own face and the face of others" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 274). Positive strategies can include expressions of interest in H, a show of solidarity and intimacy with H

through, for instance, use of in-group identity markers (e.g. jargon or dialect, or jokes), avoidance of disagreement, or offer of real and metaphorical gifts (Mauss, 1954; e.g. students proposing topics that can be of particular interest to the tutor). By contrast, negative politeness strategies involve degrees of deference and indirectness to minimise the imposition. Furthermore, an important point to consider is that the students' interactional patterns are, to an extent, a consequence of the discursive models offered by the tutors. As will be shown, this will mark a significant difference between the English and the Italian seminars.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

##### 4.1. *The English seminars*

This section discusses the students' questioning strategies, their use of politeness and the discursive construal of identity often in response to the tutors' style.

In a third year Social Anthropology seminar, for instance, that examines issues of meaning-making and the power relations that such a process entails, the tutor's speculative questions encouraging critical stance, as in (4) and (5), provide a discursive model:

(4) [EAN3]

→ T *um, so can you kinda move a step from your data you know from the information? And what does it say about the notion of talent? What is it, what what kind of point is he trying to make...*

(5) [EAN3]

T *and what might that be about if you were to take Kinsbury's analysis as...*

With regard to students' questions, the majority are epistemic with a significant cognitive content, as in (6), others are conducive, as in (7), and a few contingent, as in (8). Such a variety suggests the students' conversational resourcefulness and their ability to respond to the 'on record' or open face threats in the tutor's question.

(6) [ELT5]

FSt2 ... And they often refer to the heart as, *what were they talking about when they were talking about opening up?* Your heart opens up with joy that was a metaphor that came up quite a few times.

(7) [EAN3]

FSt The meanings that the words acquire through their association with enjoying patterns of social relations and activity in daily life.

T um um

→FSt2 *It's like there's no one definition for the word is there?*

(8) [EAN3]

T ... and do you remember that dispositions is- can be mental dispositions and also bodily dispositions?

→FSt2 *Yes, I wasn't quite sure what he- what does he mean by bodily dispositions? You mean the way people are?*

Furthermore, questions can follow a tutor's turn, or be autonomously produced<sup>6</sup>, as in the Anthropology seminar, where the majority of the questions show some degree of topic autonomy. As a way of illustration, in (9) the student's conducive question, still centred on the issue of head-hunting, contributes an original comment, while as a politeness strategy, the prefacing agreement ("yes that is important") functions as a hedge that reduces the illocutionary force of the utterance (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 146).

(9) [EAN3]

T *I think* she's very much trying [...] *I think it's very important* to project just to say how how can we understand this passion to take heads in relationship to more um + the more ordinary experience of getting on with life, so translation has to do that as well

→FSt2 I expect, yes that is important because *I mean you can come to so many sort of moral conclusions about head hunting can't you?*

T ahah, ahah

FSt2 - I mean your first reaction (is) shshsh shudder [chuckle]

As shown above, students seem to 'accommodate' (cf. Coupland *et al.*, 1991) to the discursive models of critical analysis provided by the tutors and develop an 'apprenticeship' with them in which the consistent use of self-reflexive statements is a marker of "shared discourse membership" (Rudolph, 1994: 220), as in (10) and (11) below.

(10) [EAN3]

FSt Um my notes were a bit jumbled I'm afraid... *I found interesting* what she was saying about her theoretical approach

T Yeah ok tell us a bit about

→FSt and how she went into this, *just a couple of things went through my mind* she she was saying about having or seeing ideology as separate from any sort of ordinary language and that's sort of different ...

(11) [EAN3]

FSt ...I think and I'm not sure whether he's also talking about practice in terms of a scientific approach. *I think he might be talking* about it both ways but certainly he means practice by concrete human activity

Politeness strategies both safeguard and restore the students' face, while establishing solidarity and common ground with their tutor, as in (12), and peers, as in (13), where students collude and bond with one another, but do not enact a "distancing strategy" to disengage from their task (Benwell & Stokoe, 2005: 127-130).

(12) [EAN3]

FSt3 Some weeks you do connect straight away but other weeks you're like [laughter] very near to confusion completely.

→FSt1 *Do you sometimes get the feeling* that the one you did (their/your) presentations on, that actually they are actually writing for other academics?

T Oh of course

(13) [EAN3]

T ... Diana is going to give us a presentation on Bourdieu [background laughter]

FSt1 Are you? [general laughter] (??) and you couldn't understand

FSt2 How did you understand that? My god!

FSt3 We'll see what I did on it [general laughter]

In (14) below, instead, humour and laughter are strategies the student uses to represent herself as still part of the community in spite of her blunder, the mispronunciation of Bourdieu's name. The tag following the association of Bourdieu with wine invokes solidarity (which the student obtains in the subsequent turn) and the joke works as a face-redressive politeness strategy in response to the tutor's on record FTA to her positive face.

(14) [EAN3]

FSt1 ah I read Boom um I tried to read the Bordeaux but ah failed so

T Bourdieu yeah

→FSt1 *Yeah Bordieu yeah, sounds like a wine doesn't it?*

FSt2 Wish it was [laughter] would have been (??), would have gone down easier [general laughter]

Students' interactional autonomy is also expressed by their ability to counteract their tutor's interactional strategies, for instance through a competent management of conducive questions. Conduciveness varies in the degree



of effectiveness depending upon its formulation and context. Conducive questions involve an old presupposition underlying the speaker's question and a new presupposition that the hearer is expected to confirm (Bublitz, 1981, and Piazza, 2002)<sup>7</sup>. In a History seminar, part of a course that explored the social and mental attitudes and structures in pre-industrial European societies, conducive questions asked by the tutor with the purpose of encouraging a given reading of the texts, are immediately detected as such by the students and responded to accordingly. Frequently, the follow-up to a tutor's conducive question is a subsequent question with a supportive or challenging function, and mainly a token of student's accommodation to tutor's style (Rudolph, 1994, and Coupland *et al.*, 1991). In (15) a student attempts to support the presupposition he perceives as underlying the tutor's question, and, in terms of politeness, by expressing deference to and agreement with the tutor, tries to establish common grounds with him.

(15) [EHS1]

T ... So legal systems can have very precise or very elastic definitions of the crime can't they?

→MSt *Isn't it yes, isn't it true that in the Catholic countries there was the state ... the Catholics burned heretics and the Protestants burnt witches and the- vice- and the Catholics didn't burn witches and the Protestants didn't burn heretics*

In other cases, a conducive question in response to a tutor's equally conducive question is a face-redressive politeness strategy to resist the tutor's FTA. In (16) the student responds to the tutor's challenge: that there is limited evidence in support of the theory according to which witch craze was a consequence of a community's inability to cope with its poor and aging population. With a conducive question that contradicts the tutor's expected negative answer, the student protects his face by calling in an authoritative source (Thomas) in support of his claim.

(16) [EHS1]

T Do you find evidence to support that theory? which is put forward by Alan MacFarlane ... Are there more people more poor people?

→MSt *(??) wasn't that one of the points that Thomas is making? There's actually more poverty in the- the- at least the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> sorry 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century.*

In conclusion, from this discussion of interactional patterns, the English seminars display a good degree of student autonomy in various ways: (i) through the use of mostly epistemic questions, attesting to the students' inquisitive atti-

tude; (ii) through subtopic-initiating moves and interpretative approach to texts; and (iii) through the production of conducive questions in response to tutor's similar questions, which shows the students' resourcefulness in an asymmetrical situation. In conjunction with these questioning strategies, the presence of politeness strategies for protecting face and redressing FTAs confirms the image of these English students as independent interactants, who are cast by their tutors as members of the same academic community and are able to construct an in-group membership with their peers.

#### 4.2. *The Italian seminars*

The Italian seminars in the corpus exhibit different discursive patterns depending on the functions they fulfil: they can be the forum for the creation of an in-class macro text to which all students contribute with their presentations (as in the Italian Literature seminar), the place for reporting on topic-related reading (Cultural Anthropology), or they can offer the opportunity to gather indispensable tools to ensure that students' essay/project writing can be carried out (Linguistics). However, although different in their structure, all Italian seminars in this corpus share the same dispreference for questions, which appear only in rare occasions, mainly with the purpose of negotiating a learning contract between students and tutors.

As in the English seminars, these students' discursive style seems to follow from the tutors' interactional modalities. However, in the English context most tutors display a similar style that, while patrolling the students' participation to the discussion, grants them leeway to express their views. In the Italian context, on the contrary, tutors' styles vary considerably and can be arranged along a cline that goes from 'detached', in the case of tutors who encourage the students' autonomy, to 'contact', in the case of those who closely supervise every step of the interaction (cf. Piazza, 1999 and 2001). Nonetheless the absence of questions in the Italian context does not rule out some degree of student autonomy. The students engage in text interpretation, although often after securing the tutors' approval with subtle politeness strategies. Tutors, on the other hand, tend to provide a closure to each interactional exchange, which is a reminder of the evaluation or comment at the end of the initiation, reply, feedback (IRF) sequence identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

Italian students' questions are also often referential in that they aim to clarify immediately preceding information as in (17) below, where the question comes at the end of a string of student's agreement turns in deferent support of her tutor (*Sì sì infatti* / Yes, yes, indeed.).

(17) [IHS1]

T... cioè come le donne maturano una nuova soggettività, è legata ad aspetti e ad episodi anche strettamente legati alla vita singola

FSt *Sì sì infatti*

T di queste persone che si intrecciano pure con la storia più grande che si vive in quegli anni. In che senso allora (si è cercato) di fare questo intreccio (? ?)

FSt *Sì infatti (? ?)*

T (? ?) c'è questo intreccio tra grande storia e piccola storia individuale in base alle testimonianze raccolte anche raccolte dalla Bravo

→ FSt I collegamenti fra?

[T... in other words women reach a new identity, which is in relation to aspects and events at times strictly related to the individual lives

FSt *Yes, yes, indeed.*

T of these people that become intertwined with the big history of those years. In what sense the (historians have tried) to establish this connection (? ?)

FSt *Yes (? ?)*

T (? ?) there is this connection between big history and small individual story based on the evidence gathered by Bravo

→ FSt The connection between?]

In seminars of the detachment kind, where the student number is at times considerable (e.g. up to 27 students) tutors supervise the students' presentations. A seminar centred on Calvino's stories from *Ultimo viene il corvo* is characterised by the total absence of students' questions. Furthermore, as shown in (18), the detached tutor avoids use of direct indicators of in-group membership, such as pronouns, to refer directly to the students (Brown & Gilman, 1960), and favours instead anonymous nominalizations (*una bella scioltezza* / a very good fluency) as a distancing strategy, and a politeness strategy that consists in delivering the FTA in the second part of the turn through one more nominalization (*Qualche ... particolare può essere... sviluppato* / Some...details can be...developed) – corresponding to Brown & Levinson's (1987: 190) impersonal strategy.

(18) [ILT5]

T Bene. Bene, molto bene, *una bella scioltezza, una bella capacità di inquadramento* [...] *Qualche piccolo particolare può essere tranquillamente sviluppato...*

[T Well, well, very well, *a very good fluency, a good ability to contextualise the topic* [...] *Some minor details can be easily developed...*]

In (19) the tutor uses a similar impersonal strategy when he refers to the student in the third person (*Anche lui ha toccato tutti i particolari* / He also has touched on all the details) rather than addressing him directly.

(19) [ILT5]

T Cerchiamo di- di stringere al massimo. Mm Ghiron. *Anche lui ha toccato tutti i particolari*, mi sembra, di questo racconto...

[T Let's try to be as brief as possible. Mm Ghiron. *He also, I believe, has touched on all the details* of this story...]

The general impression of this seminar is that students perceive the tutor as an authoritative figure whose face is to be carefully preserved. In fact, the only very few direct requests by the students are politeness strategies aimed at negotiating the tutor's permission to produce an evaluative comment without threatening his authority. Overall, only occasionally do students express their evaluation vis-à-vis the texts they are studying (e.g. *è una descrizione molto simpatica...* / it's it's a very nice description. *E l'ufficiale americano hh, e e – questo è un pezzo secondo me molto importante...* / And the American officer, and – I think this is a very important point...). On the contrary, when they feel they are engaging in a more critical stance, they become more self-conscious of the asymmetry of the relationship with the tutor. Therefore, their capacity to elaborate on the texts and establish analogies within various materials is accompanied by cautious efforts to avoid disagreement with the tutor. Hedging often suggests the difficulty of such speaker's task in consideration of hearer's wants, and the public acknowledgement of his/her authority. In (20), however hesitantly (*forse, vorrei tentare* / maybe I'd like to attempt), the student expresses a desire to establish a connection between Calvino's characters and Musil's, while the tutor discourages that association by pointing out his inability to help (*Non lo conosco* / I don't know him).

(20) [ILT5]

MSt Qui c'è anche l'impossibilità di partecipare a questa azione.

→E forse, *vorrei tentare di forse* perché mm mi rammentavo una cosa lì per lì ho dato un esame di letteratura tedesca ho letto un romanzo di (?proper name?) un po' mi ricordava il (??) un pochino.

T Mm (non lo conosco)

[MSt Here there is also the impossibility to participate to this action.

→And maybe, *I'd like to attempt maybe* because um I suddenly remembered something I took a German literature exam, I've read a novel by (?proper name?) it reminded a bit of (??)

T Mm (I don't know him)]

Students' interventions are publicly negotiated, while the politeness strategy of showing deference ensures that the tutor's face is safe. Students may show recognition of the tutor's role by citing his words as in (21)<sup>8</sup>, where to the tutor's optimistic view of Calvino's post-war scenario the student opposes a mild critique (a cynical vision of reality) substantiated by the mention of an alternative textual authority whose name is unfortunately incomprehensible (FSt: *Però leggendo* (?proper name?) / FSt: But as I was reading (?proper name?))

(21) [ILT5]

MSt ... *Scusi io vorrei dire una cosa perché*

T Sì

MSt (Lei dice) (??) c'ha codesto (??). Ma io ho trovato qui + cioè vivono in un modo ottimistico insomma (??)

T Ottimistico, direi, non tragico.

MSt Non (??)=

T =Non tragico.

MSt Esatto. Questo l'avevo riconosciuto anch'io. *Però leggendo* (?proper name?), lui dice, i racconti si sviluppano secondo uno schema abbastanza fisso.

T =Sì

MSt =Almeno nel senso (??) lo svolgimento verso la (??) degli affetti umani, politici (??) per il caos.

T =Benissimo

MSt =La cauta speranza in un avvenire seppure (??) migliore, (??) popolare viene (??) (respinto).

T Ma a quali racconti si riferisce lui, a tutti in generale?

MSt Eh sì.

T A a tutta la raccolta?

MSt Sì tutta. Dice che [...]

T Mi sembra mm codesto un ragionamento + inapplicabile alla enorme diversità di questi di questi racconti. È un po' troppo generale.

[MSt ... *Excuse me I'd like to say one thing because*

T Yes

MSt (You say) (??) it has this (??). However I have found here+ I mean they live in an optimistic way (??)

T Optimistic I'd say, not tragic.

MSt Not (??)=

T =Not tragic.

MSt That's right. I thought of that myself. *But as I was reading* (?proper name?), he says, the stories develop according to a relatively fixed structure.

T =Yes

MSt = At least in the sense (??) the move towards the (??) of human and political relationships (??) toward chaos.

T = Very well

MSt = The cautious hope in an even (??) better future (??) popular is (??) refused

T What stories does he refer to, all of them in general?

MSt Yes

T To the entire collection?

MSt Yes the entire collection. He says that [...]

T I think um this claim + is not applicable to the enormous diversity of all these stories. It's a bit too general].

In some cases, the students' interactional strategies seem of limited cognitive weight as they are aimed at obtaining from their tutor precise information that would equip them with tools to write their papers. In a Linguistics seminar conducted in the detachment mode, for instance, the few student-initiated questions are generally very instrumental and aimed to ensure the necessary help from the tutor, as in the indirect request for help in (22), or negotiate a contract with him as in (23), where the student's politeness strategy consists of the metaphorical gift of his work which he offers to suit the tutor's interest.

(22) [ILG4]

MSt (...) io sullo specchio ho trovato qualcosa

T Sì.

→MSt *Però non so come uh come inserirlo su questo discorso qui....*

[MSt (...) I have found something on the idea of the mirror

T Yes

→MSt *However, I'm not sure how to incorporate it in this discussion ...]*

(23) [ILG4]

→MSt *Eh le interesserebbe un'analisi tipo- un'analisi sulla struttura di alcune parole scritte in modo strano ma pronunciate (??)*

[ →MSt *Eh would you be interested in an analysis, a sort of analysis on the structure of some words written in a strange way yet pronounced (??)]*

In seminars characterised by close contact between tutor and students, the assiduous turn-by-turn patrolling by the tutor curtails the students' autonomous space but also ensues a reassuring atmosphere and reduces the need for politeness strategies generally accompanying the students' expression of disagreement, as in (24) and (25).

(24) [IAN3]

→T Cioè insomma diciamo che l'etnografo deve rivolgersi *se ho capito bene* no?

FSt [Clears throat]

FSt =Uh-hum.

T =Che l'etnografo deve rivolgersi a informatori che giudica competenti. È questo? O no?

→FSt *Ma non credo*. Cioè lui dice praticamente che...

[→T So basically let's say that the ethnographer must resort to *if I understood it correctly*?

FSt [Clears throat]

FSt =Uh-hum.

T = the ethnographer must resort to informers s/he deems competent. Is that it? Or not?

→FSt *I don't think so*. I mean he says basically that ...]

(25) [IPH2]

MSt ...il discorso è molto- segue un filo logico e molto preciso, quindi è facile seguirlo [...] *Però nonostante questo io non lo condivido un in certi aspetti*. [...]

[MSt... his argument is very- it follows a logical and precise line, therefore it's easy to follow it [...] *However, in spite of this I don't agree with some aspects of it...*]

The tendency to claim common ground and express deference by quoting the hearer's preceding discourse (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987: 102-106) remains a widespread strategy even in this type of seminars, as in (26).

(26) [IAN3]

FSt Um: poi um in conclusione afferma che praticamente porre eh nell'intervista domande su domande può portare eh l'informatore a giungere a delle deduzioni a cui non arriverebbe mai ragionando da solo.

T Certo.

→FSt =*E però come diceva poc'anzi lei*, con il fatto che il silenzio appunto interessa quanto una risposta, anche questo è un fatto molto indicativo per un antropologo...

[FSt Hm: then um in conclusion he claims that basically the practice of asking questions over questions may lead the researcher to draw conclusions that he would never have reached if he had followed his own judgement.

T Of course

→FSt =*Yet as you said earlier*, the fact that silence is as interesting as an answer is a very indicative fact for an anthropologist...]

In conclusion, in the observed Italian seminars the students' behaviour is characterised by a general absence of questions, with a few instrumental ones through which the students try to secure vital information that enables them to write their essays. Although these students do not seem as pro-active as their English colleagues in addressing their tutors and taking up issues, they are able to engage in critical textual tasks. In an Italian context students seem to negotiate their discourse production with their tutors more than in an English context and they often face either detached tutors, who encourage independence by distancing themselves from the students' textual constructions, or patrolling tutors who protectively but insistently interfere. Questions do not prove very useful in identifying the nature of the Italian seminars as questioning is clearly a dispreferred behaviour. Politeness strategies instead seem more rewarding and suggest that Italian students behave differently according to the tutor and the learning context. In the detachment model, the asymmetry between tutor and students seems emphasised and students feel that making a significant critical contribution threatens the tutor's face; therefore politeness strategies suggesting that the students are attending to the tutors' wants and interests are enacted. In the contact model, on the contrary, characterised by the tutor's parent/guardian presence, the intimacy of the interaction reduces the need for politeness strategies and students do not always feel the pressing urge to soften their disagreement with the tutor.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the interactional styles of students in England and Italy in the context of academic seminars, that are not "a goal-oriented problem-solving session", but rather an open-ended exploration of the subject matter (Benwell, 1999: 556), and has offered some indication of existing differences between the two contexts. The more active and engaged role of the English students as compared with their Italian counterparts is visible in the questions they ask that are high on the cognitive and functional levels, and diverse in ranging from speculative to conducive. The English students also initiate several questioning sequences and manage to introduce new subtopics. When detecting the conduciveness of their tutor's questions, they confidently reply with an assenting/supporting or challenging move, thus showing their ability to identify the pragmatic function of that discourse segment. In the Italian context, on the contrary, the students avoid questions or ask a few instrumental ones, mostly contingent or referential, when they need immediate clarification or pivotal



information about their future work. Also in the area of politeness, this study has highlighted a diversity between the two contexts. The English students resort to a number of strategies to protect their face and create an in-group peer community; they also develop an apprenticeship with their tutor who is sympathetic of their difficulties in dealing with complex texts. Politeness is associated with the power dimension and the desired intention of the exchange; a speaker in a position of relative power, for instance, is less likely to resort to off-record, indirect politeness to request something of the addressee while the speaker, in the presence of a more powerful interlocutor, may feel the need to be openly polite. In the Italian seminars a detachment model generally involves a greater use of politeness than the contact model. Generally, the politeness strategies employed by the Italian group seem targeted to simply make a break through the tutors' authoritative figure and gain the right to make critical contributions. Even in the case of the expression of deference, through reference to the tutor's previous discourse, Italian students prefer on-record, explicit strategies, in contrast to the indirectness of their English colleagues.

In conclusion, in both contexts students are cast as members of the academic community and socialised into this new role. However, there are noticeably distinct interactional styles in the two sets of seminars due to the different students' relationship to their tutors and their teaching styles. By following the students' questioning and politeness strategies in the two contexts, this study has reconstructed their intentions (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 7). It has traced the forms in which students construe their identity discursively mainly in response to the way their tutors cast them as novice members of an academic community and expect various degrees of critical intervention (cf. Richards & Skelton, 1991). In this context, therefore, and in line with Garfinkel (1967), identity is viewed as an 'accomplishment' or 'performance' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 37) that is continuously changed and readjusted. The dichotomy between the two sets of students' strategies is also suggestive of the different cultural interpretation of seminars as a teaching experience in England and Italy and the different degrees of autonomy granted to the students.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> For example, Wu's (1993) study of questions in a classroom in Hong Kong suggests the preference among students in that cultural context for questions which carry a lower risk of losing face. Hence closed questions requiring a short and precise answer are preferred to open questions, which involve greater responsibility on the part of the respondents and have a more direct impact on their face.

<sup>2</sup> The data was collected by myself at the University of Sussex in England, and by Laurie Anderson at the University of Siena at Arezzo, in Italy. Many thanks to all colleagues and their students at my home university who allowed the recordings and cooperated on this project by offering

their comments and reflections on the data. Due to space constraints, the examples for this article are taken from only some of these seminars.

<sup>3</sup>With regard to issues of identity and face and their relation to (im)politeness, see Spencer-Oatey (2007) in issue 39 of the *Journal of Pragmatics* edited by Spencer-Oatey and Ruhi.

<sup>4</sup>Harris (1984), for example, observes questions as a mode of control in magistrates' court. Similarly, Woodbury (1984) finds that questions are used strategically to control evidence and establish new information, Shuy (1995) investigates the questions judges ask prospective jurors which often guide their responses, while Luchjenbroers (1997) believes that the questioning strategies of the barristers, as well as the answers of the witnesses, are a function of the attitude of both to the defendant.

<sup>5</sup>Transcription symbols: T Tutor; MSt/FSt Male/Female Student; [Comment on text or context]; (Unclear or incomprehensible text); + Short pause; + + Longer pause; = Latching; UPPER CASE Loud voice; Text: Stretched vowel; Tex- Interrupted text, incomplete or suspended. Punctuation roughly reflects intonation. The translation of the Italian excerpts is given in square brackets.

<sup>6</sup>The reference here is to the initiative-response analysis by Linell *et al.* (1988), in which the opening up of a sequence in an exchange as opposed to a responding move is seen as a token of autonomy.

<sup>7</sup>For example, in the question 'Are you no longer at UWE?' there is a polarity between the old presupposition (*I thought you were still at UWE*) and the new one (*You may no longer be there*).

<sup>8</sup>The politeness strategy of acknowledging the tutor's conversational contributions to introduce some critical comment is very common in the Italian seminars, as in the following excerpt: [IPH2] MSt: Sì, (? ?) *il discorso che ha fatto lei*. Cioè pensare a un filosofo ad un (rivoluzionario) che è, che anticipa il tempo.../ 'Yes, (? ?) *what you said earlier*. That is if one thinks of a philosopher, a (revolutionary) who is, who is a forerunner...'.

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